

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BUENOS AIRES 5486

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: SHUM, AR
SUBJECT: REGIONALLY-FOCUSSED SPEECHES ON HUMAN RIGHTS

REF: STATE 176956

1. EXCEPT FOR ITS PERENNIAL BORDER AND SOVEREIGNTY PROBLEMS WITH CHILE, BRAZIL AND GREAT BRITAIN, ARGENTINA'S MAJOR FOREIGN POLICY PROBLEMS REVOLVE AROUND HUMAN RIGHTS. THE GOA RESPONSE TO US SANCTIONS AND GROWING EUROPEAN PUBLIC CRITICISM HAS SHIFTED SOMEWHAT IN RECENT MONTHS. PREVIOUSLY, GOA TRIED TO ARGUE AWAY HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES AS AN UNFORTUNATE RESULT OF A DIRTY WAR AND AN EXAGGERATION EXPLOITED BY AN INTERNATIONAL LEFTIST CAMPAIGN TO DISCREDIT THE GOVERNMENT. LATELY, HOWEVER, GOA MAY BE SHIFTING TOWARDS A NEW TACK: RE-EMPHASIZING TIES WITH THE THIRD WORLD AND EVEN COMMUNIST COUNTRIES AS A COUNTER-WEIGHT TO US "REJECTION" OVER HUMAN RIGHTS. THE MOTIVES ARE NOT ENTIRELY CLEAR AND ARE PROBABLY VARIED. CONCERNED WITH GROWING US AND EUROPEAN PRESSURE, GOA IS SEEKING TO EXPAND ITS OPTIONS AND SOURCES OF FOREIGN GOODS AND SUPPORT. HOW MUCH ITS CURRENT APPROXIMATION TO THE THIRD WORLD IS DESIGNED AS A WARNING TO THE WEST OR AN EFFORT TO REGAIN WESTERN RESPECT BY PROMOTING ARGENTINA AS A BRIDGE

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OR MODERATOR TO THE THIRD WORLD IS NOT ALTPGAOGETHER CLEAR. IT COULD BE, HOWEVER, A TECHNIQUE TO RELEGATE THE HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE TO A LESS PROMINENT PLANE IN ITS FOREIGN AFFAIRS.

2. ARGENTINE HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS HAVE TOLD US THAT THE STRONG, OPEN AND VOCAL EFFORTS OF THE US ON BEHALF

OF HUMAN RIGHTS HAVE SERVED AS A MODEL FOR THEIR OWN ACTIVITIES IN THE COUNTRY. THE US POSITION, THEY SAY, HAS STRENGTHENED THE HAND OF THOSE IN THE ARGENTINE HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT WHO ARE WORKING FOR A MORE OPEN PUBLIC CONSIDERATION OF THE PROBLEM.

3. HOWEVER, IT IS DIFFICULT TO MEASURE PUBLIC OPINION ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE, GIVEN THE FACT THAT THERE IS A DE FACTO MILITARY REGIME, A STATE OF SEIGE AND PRESS SELF CENSORSHIP IN EFFECT ON QUESTIONS RELATED TO TERRORISM. WHAT DOES PREDOMINATE IN THE MEDIA IS A HUFFY DEFENSE OF THE NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY WITH ALTERNATING DEGREES OF XENOPHOBIC EMOTION AND SOPHISTICATION. WE BELIEVE THAT THE HUMAN RIGHTS CONSTITUENCY IN ARGENTINA, I.E. THOSE CONCERNED ABOUT PERSONAL RIGHTS, IS STILL QUITE THIN. IT MAY GROW AS THE FULL SCOPE OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS THAT CLANDESTINELY HAVE TAKEN PLACE SEEPS INTO THE PUBLIC MIND, BUT THIS MAY BE A PROTRACTED DEVELOPMENT BECAUSE (AMONG OTHER REASONS):

(A) HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS FOR MANY YEARS HAVE BEEN A WAY OF LIFE HERE (ALTHOUGH NEVER ON THE SCALE OF THAT EXPERIENCED SINCE THE MID-1970S);

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(B) THE GREAT MASS OF THE POPULATION -- WORKERS AND PERONISTS INCLUDED -- DO NOT IDENTIFY WITH THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF THE MIDDLE CLASS WHO, IN ORGANIZING THE ERO AND MONTONEROS, ATTEMPTED TO FOB THEMSELVES OFF AS PROLETARIAT.

4. FOR MANY ARGENTINES, BOTH THOSE FOR AND AGAINST THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT, TALK ABOUT "PERSONAL RIGHTS" IS A CODEWORD FOR A BROADER AND MORE IMPORTANT QUESTION -- THE ISSUE OF A RETURN TO DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS, WHICH IS SEEN AS BEING SYMBIOTICALLY CONNECTED WITH THAT OF PERSONAL RIGHTS. LEADERS OF THE OLD POLITICAL PARTIES TELL US -- QUIETLY -- THAT THEY SUPPORT OUR HUMAN RIGHTS POLICIES, BECAUSE THEY VIEW THE POLICY AS CONTRIBUTING TO THE CAUSE OF AN EVENTUAL RETURN TO DEMOCRACY. (THEIR PUBLIC PRONOUNCEMENTS ON PERSONAL RIGHTS HAVE BEEN FEW AND GINGERLY, HOWEVER.) FOR THESE LEADERS, PERSONAL RIGHTS CANNOT BE GUARANTEED UNTIL THERE IS FULL RESTORATION OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT. WE NOTE TOO THAT THE GOVERNMENT, WHEN IT TALKS ABOUT MOVING TOWARD A RESTORATION OF "THE RULE OF LAW", USUALLY PLACES THIS IN THE

CONTEXT OF BEGINNING THE PROCESS OF POLITICAL REDEMOCRATIZATION. (SEE BUENOS AIRES 5298 IN WHICH WE ARGUED FOR A POSTURE THAT WOULD PERMIT US PLAUSIBLY TO DENY TO GOA OFFICIALS THAT WE WERE EXPLICITLY PUSHING NOW FOR A RETURN TO DEMOCRATIC FORMS IN ORDER NOT TO PREJUDICE WHAT PROSPECTS THERE ARE FOR ENHANCEMENT OF PERSONAL RIGHTS BY THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT -- WHICH WE SEE AS CONTINUING IN POWER FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE.)

5. EMBASSY SHOULD ALSO NOTE OUR BELIEF THAT THE ENTHUSIASTIC RECEPTION WHICH VIDELA RECEIVED DURING AND JUST AFTER THE MUNDIAL WAS LARGELY A DEMONSTRATION OF HURT NATIONALISTIC PRIDE (IN CONFIDENTIAL

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PART MANIPULATED) IN REACTION TO THE PROPAGANDA BEING MOUNTED AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT AND THE ARMED FORCES FROM ABROAD ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE.

6. PARTLY TO ENHANCE HIS IMAGE, POLITICALLY AMBITIOUS ADMIRAL MASSERA IS MAKING A POLITICAL ISSUE OUT OF CERTAIN LIMITED ASPECTS OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS QUESTION. THE MOST VIVID EXAMPLE OF THIS WAS THE RECENT PRESS EXCHANGE BETWEEN THE NAVY AND THE ARMY SPOKESMAN ON WHETHER OR NOT TO PUBLISH THE NAMES OF ARGENTINES KILLED BY SECURITY FORCES IN THE ANTI-TERRORISM CAMPAIGN. THIS IS A MOST INTERESTING DEVELOPMENT. MASSERA -- WHOSE HANDS CERTAINLY ARE NOT CLEAN -- COULD PROVE TO BE A MOTOR MECHANISM FOR ACCELERATING THE POLITICAL PROCESS AND -- IN THE PROCESS -- OPENING UP THESE SENSITIVE ISSUES TO PUBLIC VIEW. CASTRO

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